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THE SCHOOLBOY'S NIGHTMARE

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[*Motif*: "The Daffodils," by Wm. Wordsworth]

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. . . .

FOREWORD

The present movement in the city high schools toward teaching literature through dramatization has its limitations.

SCENE: *A bedroom. A small boy, aetat. 14, a first-term student in one of the city high schools, discovered asleep. He turns about, and begins to moan, and mutters, "Yes, sir," "I forgot—" "We had so much other work to do." The scene gradually changes to a classroom. One boy, Jacob Keslowitz, sitting alone, pallid and nerveless. In the front of the room are all the teachers of the English Department—Mr. French, Miss Miller, Mr. Smythe, Mr. Markham, Mr. Goodrich, Miss Coxe, Mr. Burch, and others—twenty in all.*

(The bell rings, teachers straighten up, boy sinks down in his chair.)

Chorus of Teachers: The class will come to order.

(Boy raises himself one quarter of an inch.)

Mr. Burch: Keslowitz, read the diary for the last recitation.

Boy (reading): Yesterday, we come into the English class—

Miss Miller (to boy): Did you think about that before you wrote it, or did you write it offhand?

Boy: I thought about it.

Teachers: I what?

Boy (rattled): I thunk—

Teachers (some standing):

I—what?

Boy: I thought.

Mr. Williams (handing him large sheet of paper):

Write "I thought" twenty-five times, please.

Mr. Smythe (to Miss Coxe):

Probably his ideas were *thunked*, if I may judge from the result.

Mr. Markham: Now, boy, we have for today a beautiful little poem entitled "The Daffodils." Who wrote it, Keslowitz?

Boy: Robert Browning.

Teachers: Who?

Boy (perceiving dimly he has made an error):

Wadsworth.

Miss Miller (throws up her hands and a look of infinite despair crosses her face):

Keslowitz, that shows again how little you thought. Spell it.

Boy: W-o-r-d-s-w-o-r-t-h.

Teachers: Pronounce.

Boy (wearily): Wordsworth.

Mr. Williams (handing him another sheet of paper):

"Wordsworth"—twenty-five times.

Mr. French: Well, class, this is an exquisite little poem, revealing the soft and tender emotions of a man who sees beauty, joy, gladness, and hope in the sun-kissed daffodils.

Mr. Smythe: I remember, boy, the first time I read that poem, and it appealed to me so much that I filled my room with daffodils.

Miss Coxe: How do you know that the author was English, Keslowitz?

Keslowitz: Because he was born in England.

Miss Coxe: No, but because only in England do the daffodils grow in the way he describes. I saw many banks of daffodils there last summer.

Miss Miller (to teachers):

We are getting away from the point, however.
Let us be pertinent. Put leading questions.

Mr. Williams: Who was Wordsworth, Keslowitz?

Boy: He was an American author.

(*Miss Coxe faints*)

Mr. Goodrich: Still living?

Boy: No, he died about four hundred years ago.

Mr. Jenkins (sternly):

Boy, you are unprepared. Zero; and if you
get another, I'll inform your parents.

(*Boy looks dazed.*)

Miss Miller: Did you read the poem, Keslowitz?

Boy: No, ma'am; yes, ma'am.

Miss Waters: Keslowitz, how would a bank of daffodils
affect you?

Boy: It would make me feel good.

Teachers: It would make me feel what?

Boy: Well.

Mr. Williams (handing him sheet of yellow paper):

Twenty-five times.

Miss Miller: Go to the board, Keslowitz, and give us a
digest of the poem.

(*Boy goes to the board and writes. Teachers busy themselves
making out daily reports. Boy after a very bad five minutes
takes seat.*)

Mr. French: Here we have Keslowitz' summary of the poem.
(*Reads*) "It shows how a poet while thinking,
thinks in his mind what a nice poem he could
make up of the daffodils which were flowers."

Teachers: What a criticism. Is that English? Where
do you suppose he thinks; in his feet? Is
that sense?

Miss Waters: If you thought in your mind, you would not
write anything like that.

Mr. Chambers: Brother Keslowitz, can you analyze that
sentence.

Mr. French: A little obscure, Keslowitz, but at least you have discovered that daffodils are flowers.

(*Keslowitz looks a trifle bewildered.*)

Miss Coxé: Keslowitz, do you really understand the poem?

Keslowitz (weakly): Yes, ma'am.

Miss Coxé: Well, then, I would like to see you act it. Put it into play form and go through all the actions and dialogue.

Keslowitz: Must I be the poet or the daffodil?

Miss Coxé: You be the poet, and let that corner of the room be the daffodils, and act as naturally as you can.

Miss Miller (to teachers):

I think it is *such* a good idea to dramatize everything. The boys will understand it much better.

(*Keslowitz rises from his seat and walks toward back of room.*)

Mr. Williams: Not too fast, remember you're sad.

Mr. French: You must look as though you had just lost ten cents.

Mr. Chambers: Be more graceful, Keslowitz; remember you're a poet.

Miss Moore: How lonely you are, Keslowitz.

Keslowitz: Lonely as a cloud.

Miss Moore: Well, go ahead.

(*Keslowitz ponders, trying to look as lonely as a cloud. Suddenly he pulls a rather soiled handkerchief from his pocket and waves it about his head.*)

Miss Coxé: What are you doing?

Keslowitz: That's the cloud.

Mr. Smythe: Pretty dark one, that.

Mr. Williams: A little more spirit in your acting, Keslowitz. You are not doing anything.

Miss Moore: Raise your feet from the floor. Poets don't shuffle when they walk.

Mr. Whitehouse: Isn't there any talking in this, Keslowitz?

Keslowitz: No, the poet was alone.

Mr. Whitehouse: Well, you must put some dialogue into it.
Meet someone as you wander and talk to him.

Keslowitz: Clouds don't talk.

Mr. Whitehouse: You're not a cloud: you're just lonely like a cloud.

Mr. Smythe: Like a thick one.

(*Keslowitz stops and speaks to radiator.*)

Keslowitz: Good morning.

Answer: Good morning.

Keslowitz: Have you seen any daffodils?

Answer: Yes, sir, right over there.

Keslowitz: Then I go there; I am looking for daffodils this morning.

(*Keslowitz walks away from radiator and stops in front of book-lockers.*)

Miss Coxe: Now, there are the daffodils. Act just as though you were the poet and seeing the daffodils nodding in the breeze, your sadness disappears.

(*Keslowitz appears bewildered at the effort of finding joy in a row of book-lockers.*)

Mr. Whitehouse: A little talking, now; put your thoughts into words and say them as clearly and simply as you can.

Mr. Smythe: He'll be simple, don't worry.

Keslowitz (addressing book-lockers):

I am very sad; oh, how nice you are! Now I am happy beside the lake, beneath the trees.

Miss Coxe: That is very good. Can't you continue and do the rest of the poem—the part where you lie down on the couch.

(*Keslowitz sees nothing but desks to lie upon and hopes the bell will ring soon.*)

Miss Miller: He doesn't seem to be very good at this. Let us try him at letter-writing.

Mr. Burch: Yes, I think the poem is much more suited for transposing into letter form, than for dramatizing.

Mr. French: You destroy the beauty if you do that. Why
 tear to pieces the delicacy of a creation like this?
Miss Moore: Keslowitz, write a letter to a friend telling him
 how you have just read the poem and how much
 you like it.

*(Keslowitz, having thought the poem a silly thing, and mentally
 exhausted after his efforts to dramatize it, feels himself sinking.*

He goes to the board and begins his heading,

182 East 6th St.

Manhattan N.Y.)

Miss Moore: What is the Manhattan for?

Mr. Smythe: Did you ever see a comma, Keslowitz?

Miss Miller: Why in the world don't you punctuate?

(Keslowitz jabs a few commas and periods indiscriminately through the heading. Just then the bell rings furiously several times as a signal for the fire-drill. The teachers jump up and yell several commands at the boy. "Quickly." "Get into line." "Drop your chalk." Several of the men grab him and he is propelled vigorously both by word and force out of the door. The teachers chase him, and with the entire English Department after him he disappears down the hall).

(The scene changes slowly to a bedroom again; the boy is seen running and yelling around the room. His mother enters to find out the trouble and he awakens.)

Mother: What on earth is the matter with you, Jake?

Jake (rubs his eyes):

O—Oh, I just had an awful dream!